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SUBJECT: THE GLOVES ARE OFF -- MONTEALEGRE TO RUN ON OWN
REF: MANAGUA 0854

Classified By: Ambassador Paul A. Trivelli. Reasons 1.4 (B,D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Now that it is clear that the Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC) will neither participate in multi-party primaries nor sideline Arnaldo Aleman (reftel), Eduardo Montealegre and his National Liberal Alliance-Conservative Party (ALN-PC) are determined to run on their own. In Ambassador's April 18 meeting with Montealegre and his senior leadership, and in comments to the media following the event, the Ambassador noted that the ALN-PC is the only party that fully supports multi-party primaries and reiterated that the U.S. cannot maintain positive relations with a PLC under Aleman's control. Montealegre dispelled PLC assertions that he has designated himself as his alliance's candidate, noting that over 150,000 affiliates and alliance party members have formally endorsed him. While he has developed political machinery and performs well in the polls, Montealegre will need a concerted, generously financed campaign to effectively convey his message to Nicaraguans and turn his popular support into votes on Election Day. END SUMMARY.

EDUARDO GOES IT ALONE
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¶2. (C) Ambassador and Emboffs met on April 18 with ALN-PC presidential candidate Eduardo Montealegre and his senior leadership as part of Embassy's effort to encourage multi-party primaries. Among Montealegre's 22 supporters were Mario Rappaciolli and Alejandro Bolanos (PC); Salvador Talavera (Partido Resistencia Nicaraguense, or PRN); Eliseo Nunez (Movimiento Salvacion Liberal, or MSL); Roberto Urroz (Movimiento Democratico Nicaraguense, or MDN); Indalecio Rodriguez and Oscar Sobalvarro, otherwise known as Comandante Ruben (PLI); Jose Esteban Gonzalez (Partido Social Cristiano, or PSC); and Assembly Deputies Maria Eugenia Sequeira, Yamileth Bonilla.

¶3. (C) Appreciative of the Ambassador's visit and our offer to support multi-party primaries, Montealegre welcomed the Ambassador to his new, freshly painted headquarters. Montealegre repeated his willingness to compete against Rizo if Aleman were to step aside, noting that an alliance with the PLC under Aleman's control is untenable, as it would damage the ALN-PC and Nicaragua. At this juncture, a four-way race is inevitable and the best option to win the November election, he said. Although the task ahead is difficult, "a war of nerves," Montealegre was confident he is up to the challenge so long as he focuses on the main objective - the needs and aspirations of the Nicaraguan

people.

FOUR-WAY RACE GOOD FOR DEMOCRACY, ROUGH ON THE NERVES

14. (C) Ambassador concurred that a four-way race is in the cards, jesting that, while tough on the nerves, such a competition is probably healthier for Nicaragua's democracy. He added that this election poses a double challenge, the struggle between democracy and the FSLN and the competition between anti-Pact and pro-Pact parties. Referring to the Department's statement on Nicaragua, the Ambassador assured Montealegre that the U.S. stands firm vis a vis its position on Aleman and the PLC. (Note: Press coverage of the Department's statement was ample, generating several questions for the press availability following the Ambassador's meeting. The statement was reprinted in full by national dailies and gossip magazines and read on several nation-wide radio and television stations. While some outlets heralded the statement as another sign the USG will not support the PLC, others termed it another sign of U.S. interventionism.)

15. (C) Ambassador also reiterated the U.S. commitment to helping Nicaragua hold clean, fair, transparent, and inclusive elections, informing the group that the international community is well underway in its preparations for observation. He shared that the OAS observation team will arrive next week and will remain in Nicaragua until January. He explained that the USG is contributing USD 2.5 million to the OAS efforts and millions more to assist domestic observation and voter education, and to provide technical assistance to the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE).

WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM OUR FRIENDS

16. (C) Endorsing his party's support for Montealegre, PC leader Mario Rappaciolli recounted that the Conservatives had erred by running on their own in the 1996 and 2001 national elections. They had fared miserably and now realize that they must unite with other parties for the sake of economic and democratic stability. To Rappaciolli, the PLC is no longer an option, as it is a party held hostage by one family. Nicaraguans have reached a fork in the road and must now choose to move forward or to continue along the current ineffective path. Lauding the Department's April 18 statement on Nicaragua, which reiterates the Ambassador's call on the PLC to distance itself from Aleman and to compete in open multi-party primaries, Rappaciolli asserted that U.S. opinion counts in Nicaragua and our help can bolster Montealegre's chances to win in November.

17. (C) Rappaciolli offered that high voter turnout will work in Montealegre's favor, asserting that at least 60 percent of "independent" voters will choose Montealegre if they are ultimately motivated to vote. He added that the parties supporting Montealegre combined garnered 19% of the 2004 municipal election votes, a significant number. (Note: Rappaciolli's estimate includes votes for APRE, an alliance that the PC belonged to until 2005. The rest of APRE is currently divided between supporting the PLC and ALN-PC, though APRE's official leadership has clearly tilted towards the PLC. End Note.) Fellow Conservative Alejandro Bolanos (President Bolanos' nephew) emphasized the need to change Nicaragua's culture of fear. Many Nicaraguans customarily vote against the Sandinistas and Daniel Ortega rather than voting for a better future, he explained, asserting that Nicaragua's culture of fear has actually strengthened the FSLN. The moment has arrived for Nicaraguans to transform this fear into a vote for change, Montealegre, concluded Bolanos.

RESISTANCE: PLEASE DON'T ABANDON US MID-STREAM

18. (C) Salvador Talavera (PRN) emphasized his goal to consolidate Nicaragua's numerous Resistance groups to rally

around Montealegre. He echoed Rappaciolli's call for U.S. support, noting that some of the many Resistance groups hesitate to endorse Montealegre because they fear the U.S. will flinch and support the PLC as the November nears. The State Department's statement and the Ambassador's visit to ALN headquarters have assuaged some of this fear, he said, adding that two more Resistance groups may join Montealegre next week. According to Talavera, the PRN is the main Resistance party and contains two factions, one under Comandante Ruben, and the other under Popo Chamorro. A number of sub-groups are affiliated with these factions.

¶9. (C) According to PLI/Resistance member Indalecio Rodriguez, Nicaragua's new political leaders must seek full democracy for its people. The PLI had endorsed Montealegre in his 1,500-member convention on September 4, 2005 and ratified its support last week, he said. He explained that PLI's support for Montealegre is based on common principles: anti-autocracy, anti-FSLN (who he termed false Robin Hoods), and anti-corruption. Roberto Urroz (MDN) recounted his party's long struggle for democracy, first against Somoza, then the FSLN, and now against the FSLN-PLC Pact. He justified MDN's support for Montealegre because he is the candidate best suited to lead Nicaragua forward by breaking the pact and reducing poverty and corruption.

¶10. (C) PLI colleague Comandante Ruben asserted that the Resistance still has a role to play, noting that many Resistance members who have supported the PLC at the municipal level in the past are disillusioned and willing to support Montealegre. For the Resistance, it is especially hard to accept that after 16 years of democracy and so much sacrifice, the Liberals have surrendered space to the FSLN to protect Aleman. Now more than ever, U.S. support will be determinate in the November election.

UNIONS SUPPORT EDUARDO

¶11. (C) According to PSC leader Jose Esteban Gonzalez, Montealegre is attracting considerable support from Nicaragua's non-Sandinista unions. He shared that a number of these unions will soon publicly endorse Montealegre. (Comment: In a recent poll, Montealegre attracted considerable support from working class respondents. End Comment.)

MSL LENDS ITS CASILLA, IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES WITH PLC

¶12. (C) MSL leader Carlos Garcia, a former president of the PLC, explained his party's support for Montealegre and its decision to lend Montealegre its spot (casilla) on the ballot. According to Garcia, the MSL broke ranks with the PLC in 1998 in opposition to PLC leader Arnoldo Aleman's corruption and his decision to forge a pact with Daniel Ortega. He announced that the MSL will formally select Eduardo Montealegre as its presidential candidate in its convention on April 23.

MONTEALEGRE: MY CANDIDACY IS MORE DEMOCRATIC THAN RIZO'S

¶13. (C) Replying to Ambassador's comment that the PLC cites its presidential convention as evidence that Rizo is a democratically elected candidate while Montealegre is not, Montealegre noted that three of the four official parties in his alliance have already held conventions to select him as their candidate. The fourth party, the PC, will hold a convention on April 30. Further, all of the 148,000 or so members of his movement Vamos con Eduardo have endorsed him in writing. While some 400 or so PLC conventioners voted for Rizo, he enjoys the official support of over 150,000, argued Montealegre. Further, on May 14, Vamos con Eduardo affiliates will hold primaries to vote for National Assembly departmental deputies and the ALN-PC will also do a poll to verify the popularity of the candidates.

DISPELLING THE PARTY MACHINERY MYTH

¶14. (C) To Ambassador's query regarding the strength of Montealegre's political machinery, Montealegre replied that PLC claims that Montealegre lacks the machinery to defend his votes and win the election are bogus. Montealegre said he has worked hard over the months to build his alliance and its large membership attests to his success. In the Atlantic Coast election, for example, the ALN-PC had party monitors (fiscals) positioned in 95% of the polling stations. "Moreover, organizations don't win elections, rather candidates with the right messages do," argued Montealegre.

A VOTE FOR RIZO IS A VOTE FOR ALEMAN

¶15. (C) Her usual direct, succinct self, ALN-PC Assembly lawmaker Maria Eugenia Sequeira summed up the difference between Montealegre and Rizo: "A vote for Rizo is a vote for Aleman." She asserted that Montealegre offers a new option not only for Nicaragua, but also for the region, as he represents an alternative to stem Latin America's rise in leftist leaders. Colleague Yamileth Bonilla opined that the real challenge for Montealegre is to promote the vote, defend it, and monitor the CSE and its local offices to make sure the electoral process is fair and transparent. She added that marketing the ALN-PC casilla will also be prove critical to Montealegre's success, noting that in the Atlantic Coast elections, many voters who supported Montealegre were confused whether they should mark casilla 1 (PLC) or casilla 9 (ALN-PC) because the still associate him with the PLC. Marketing Montealegre and his casilla 9 as a new political product requires substantial resources, said Bonilla.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) In the latest CID-Gallup countrywide poll, taken after the PLC announced the selection of Jose Rizo as its presidential candidate, Eduardo Montealegre still leads the pack with 22 percent, followed by Herty Lewites (18%), Daniel Ortega (16%) and Rizo (13%). Among those most likely to vote, Montealegre's percentage stands at 26%, followed by Ortega (20%), Lewites (18%), and Rizo (17%). Montealegre offers voters the best option to move Nicaragua along a democratic, just, and prosperous future. While he has developed political machinery and performs well in the polls, Montealegre will need a concerted, generously financed campaign to effectively convey his message to Nicaraguans and turn his popular support into votes on Election Day. To this end, he requires the support of local, regional, and U.S. capital.

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